Intrinsicality

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Intrinsicality

by SaitouLover

Summary

The thing about Celeste was that, while she had been contoured - warped - into something unnaturally beautiful, she never allowed anyone, anyone, but herself to dictate her inner-most nature.

Notes

This is not A/B/O. Here, it's normal for men to be able to carry as well... just far less common. I'm thinking that for every 1000 female pregnancies there's one male pregnancy. Enough that it would turn some heads but not enough to be considered freakish. Heterosexual pregnancies are still the overwhelming majority because the majority of men who can carry are straight. It can take people by surprise because men don't have external menstruation like women.

Will grew up in a time and place where it wasn't openly acceptable, and so doctors and schools didn't screen for the ability. Things have changed since then but Will never felt the need to get himself checked.

Celeste Lambert was beautiful, even at her advancing age. A rare commodity among the haut monde of Baltimore. Her presence dazzled the room and you knew you were a somebody if she attended your event.

A jewel, she allowed herself to think sometimes, bitterly. A pretty ornament to be shown off.

All her adult life was spent belonging to others, decorating them so they seemed more than what they were. Her form was acutely contoured now, her edges rounded down or superimposed by selfish hands. Here she was, well into her grace, and every day she was a different color and shape, so much so that her original form was long forgotten.

Sometimes, when the bitterness couldn't be swallowed down, she stands in front of her bathroom mirror, naked and unpainted, and tries to remember where her edges used to be. What her body and face used to look like without people's claws digging into them.

A jewel, she thinks again. A pretty bauble for petty, little people. Constrained by sharp, subtle prongs that were all but invisible to onlookers. She imagines that her body would be covered in blood from all the puncture marks if they were real.

If a gem, then she thinks she might have been turquoise once, common and durable. Turquoise, pretty in its own way but overwhelmingly plain. An un-cut rock bound by hemp string. She thinks she used to be happy like that.

Marriage and its subsequent wealth draped her in finery, a brilliant gold setting to elevate her and make her sparkle. In a ring that had been flaunted by a demanding man with a rakish smile, Celeste became the beautiful sapphire that brought out the color of her owner's eyes.

Even now, long after her husband's unfortunate death, she was paraded front and center at galas and various high-brow events like an emerald choker, green as greed. She was pressed so tightly against so many throats that she felt their pulses. Every single one of them beat to the same shallow drum and she often forgot that they weren't all the same vapid person.

The bad days had her avoiding her reflection altogether. Makeup would be blindly applied with deft-hands in the hallway, movements engrained from decades of the exact same motions. Clothing picked at random, each outfit looking as elegant as the next and unable to be anything but beautiful. Hair styled, nails styled, *everything* styled about herself so there was nothing left of herself. Pretense after pretense and not a drop of something real. She felt like fools gold those days.

"Celeste?"

Celeste startled at the call, twitching slightly at the unexpected intrusion, and looked away from her reflection in the laptop's darkened screen. There was a long moment between blinking away the dim introspection and focusing on her visitor where she felt unmoored. It didn't show though, it never did, and she smiled softly in greeting to the young woman come to visit.

"Hello, Abigail."

Abigail stood in the office doorway staring at her curiously, BG nestled securely against her in a fabric sling. She was dressed casually and without a coat, meaning that she came from Will’s suite specifically to see Celeste. The thought chased away the lingering gloom and her smile turned more genuine.

"What's the visit for?"

Abigail shrugged minutely, trying to not wake the obviously sleeping infant. "Will fell asleep folding baby clothes. I thought he could use the nap."

Celeste laughed and stood. She motioned toward the hallway behind the teenager and Abigail turned to backtrack the way she’d been a few minutes earlier. They walked in silence until they reached Celeste’s apartment and let themselves in.

BG mewled quietly, a soft kitten noise, and Celeste turned her attention to the baby. It was clear from the tightening of Abigail’s face that the girl was worried BG would begin crying. Braelyn must have been screaming all day for that reaction.

“She just stopped,” Abigail whispered, dread building in her tone as the baby began to wriggle in earnest. “She doesn’t stop for anyone but Will and Hannibal.”

“It’s fine,” Celeste assured her calmly. She glided forward and ran a long, dry finger over the infant’s forehead, watching in concealed awe as BG settled. “She’s probably exhausted from all the screaming.”

“Want to take her?” Abigail asked, not waiting for an answer before gently passing the baby to the hotel owner.

There was a brief fumble before the older woman got a solid grip on the precious bundle handed over, but she smiled down at the infant after. Hazy maroon eyes opened, heavy with sleep and so very different from her monster-father’s. They locked onto Celeste and slipped closed once again. It sent the woman’s heart beating at double-speed until she glanced up and meet the gaze of Will’s elder daughter, standing tall and watching thoughtfully.

Abigail gave her a quirked smile, one side of her lips tilting upwards. “Will was complaining that you didn’t visit enough.”

“It’s only been a couple weeks,” Celeste pointed out. “He should be resting, not doing laundry and hosting guests.”

“But you’re not a guest,” the teen argued. “You’re family. Will *and* Hannibal both say so.”

There was a wealth of meaning behind that and, while she wasn’t empathic like Will, Celeste could parse it out quite easily.

“Will’s the one with the say-so, Abigail,” Celeste assured the younger woman.

“Hannibal doesn’t like not being in control.”

“I’m sure,” the older woman said dryly. “He’ll have to get over it.”

Abigail glanced down at BG and bit her lip. “And if he doesn’t?”

“Then he isn’t welcome.”

Silence met the dry statement until Abigail tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and met Celeste’s gaze dead-on. “You don’t like Hannibal, do you?”

Instead of answering, Celeste walked down her hallway into the living room. Abigail followed along behind, glancing at the makeup left on the entryway table as they passed. She sat on the sofa after the hotel owner took her own seat in an armchair.

"Everyone likes Hannibal."

Celeste smiled at the young woman blandly, not commenting but also not denying the earlier statement.

The teen stared for a long moment before looking down to BG. "I thought you liked him."

"I think Hannibal is good for Will," Celeste said at length, her tone carefully modulated. She continued when that caught Abigail's attention like a hook. "I think that he's exactly what Will needs."

The space between them was heavy with unanalyzed meaning, sweetened and tempting. The older woman was content to keep her voice to herself, waiting to see how damaged the girl was. Did she still have her original edges or were the prongs too deep?

"But you don't trust him," Abigail spoke eventually, tone hushed as if afraid the man could hear them and reach across the miles that separated Celeste's sitting room from Baltimore.

Celeste ran a finger over Braelyn's soft hair, subtly inhaling the smell of newborn. "Trust is a hard thing for me to give to anyone."

"You trust Will," the younger woman pointed out, testing the unseen tension in the air.

"Will is special," the hotel owner said simply, pleased to see Abigail's immediate agreement to that.

"He killed my dad," Abigail admitted eventually. "After my dad killed my mom. He saved me. Hannibal wants us to be a family."

"It doesn't matter what Hannibal wants." Celeste's gaze sharpened on Abigail, her voice deceptively soft.

Abigail stilled, as if sensing the hardness, the vague menace, Celeste kept purposefully hidden beneath her sparkling, jeweled exterior. They locked stares and there was as much uncertainty in the girl's eyes as there was understanding. A likened spirit, Abigail must be thinking. A survivor like her.

It was obvious when you knew where to look, what you were looking for. Looking at.

The young woman sitting on Celeste's sofa was cowed and her edges half chipped away. A gem in her own right, partially transformed by the hands and attention of others. Celeste could see the beginnings of a setting, tarnished gold that wasn't quite Pyrite, awkwardly bent around her by an unrefined father. She could see the start of Hannibal's elegant adjustments, shaping and sharpening the claws that held her in place.

Her sides were still jagged and ugly, nowhere close to being completed. She was still beautiful though. Broken, entire chunks of herself missing, exposing the insides to someone

else's purposeful refinement. But that very exposure generated sharp bits too. Run your finger over her just right and you'll come back with flesh torn and blood pooling.

What would you get if you polished that?

"'Cut me to see if I bleed,'" Celeste quoted absent-mindedly, "'but be sure to cut to the quick.'"

"What?" Abigail asked, confused.

Celeste jolted herself out of her contemplation and shook her head. She adjusted the baby in her arms and repeated herself. "It doesn't matter what Hannibal wants."

"Hannibal..."

"*It doesn't matter what Hannibal wants*," the older woman said sharply, surprising the teen into silence. "It matters what *Will* wants. What *Will* thinks. Will wants Hannibal. Will *needs* Hannibal. So as long as Hannibal is good for him, good *to* him, he's welcome here.

"I know men like him," she continued, "I was married to one. But Hannibal isn't him and Will isn't me. I don't particularly like Hannibal because of what he's done to Will. To you. But that doesn't mean I don't trust him."

"But you said..."

"I *said*," Celeste cut her off. "That trust is hard for me to give. Not that I don't trust him. I trust Hannibal to do what's necessary, what's *needed*. I trust that he'll dote on Will and you two. I trust that he'll do everything in his power to keep you safe and happy.

"I trust that he'll control himself. If he does that, if he proves that he can do that, then 'like' will come in time."

"And if he doesn't? If he can't" Abigail asked her, curious and a little bit awed at the strength she saw in Celeste.

"Then he isn't welcome."

The thing about Celeste was that, while she had been contoured - *warped* - into something unnaturally beautiful, she never allowed anyone, anyone, but herself to dictate her inner-most nature.

People forget that rings can cut and scar. *Disfigure*. Tear flesh with those very prongs bending the stone into its prison. Angle the blow just right, with enough force, and delicate veins can be sliced clean open.

Necklaces, by their very existence, are gladly situated at the most vulnerable spot that can be found. Pull the chain tight and a delicate bauble transforms into a charming garrote. Maybe, just maybe, if it's strong enough it can even sever the head clean off.

Beautiful things, as with everything else, can be made into weapons if desperate enough.

And while Celeste allows herself to be shaped and mutated into things pleasing to others, so much so that she's forgotten what her original shape even was once upon a time, every once in a while she gets to choose her own design.

And in those moments, when there weren't rough hands forcing her or ingratiating supplication deafening her, she was something different. Beautiful, of course, that couldn't be helped since everything ugly in her was torn away and cut away decades ago, and dangerous. Above all, dangerous.

In the rare times she fashioned her own being, Celeste was a garnet-handled dagger. Double-edged and serrated. Red as blood.

She chooses to be strong and small and vicious then. As functional as she is decorative. Look but keep your hands to yourself. Don't touch or she'll make sure you'll bleed. Celeste preferred to cut quick and clean, slip deep into exposed bellies as if they were softened butter. Everything about her was intended for calculated and succinct violence those moments. She wasn't on display, she was wielded. And when she was used, she was the one to do it. Celeste directed her own purpose.

"Then he isn't welcome," Celeste said to Abigail again, *promised* her really.

She didn't like Hannibal. He made her see herself in Will, just a little. She didn't like him because he had hurt and wounded and *betrayed* the trust given to him by someone she held dear. God or fate or whatever it could be called had seen fit to deliver her a child that she had never been able to deliver herself. Will was beautiful and kind and loving and so, so damaged, and Celeste would bring ruination down on anyone foolish enough to think they had the right to *use* him.

Celeste's heart had opened itself to Will without her permission, alternating between shoving and wrenching him inside it. Her affections, withered from time and disuse, were suddenly swollen with him and she often stopped to just *feel* the difference inside herself. Her mind was quiet then, nothing distracting her from hearing her heart whispering the word 'Son' over and over. It made her breath catch sometimes and her throat sting with tears she would never allow to fall.

She didn't *dislike* him either, Hannibal. Those two things, lack of like and dislike, weren't synonymous.

Hannibal was cold and selfish and vicious and *cruel*, but... *but*... in Will's orbit, he was kind and caring and loving and so very possessively protective. He was everything her own monster had been and everything he had *not* been. The first made her incapable of liking him, the second incapable of disliking. Until she had time, until Hannibal had truly proven himself, Celeste was stuck suspended between the two.

But Celeste knew she would have that time. Eventually, one day, she'd be able to choose between like and dislike for the doctor. She sincerely hoped that she'd be able to think on him then and hear her heart whispering 'Son', feel the utterly terrifying devotion for him that she does for Will. Because if not...

If not, there will be a rare moment when she lets herself slip away from her husband's memory and high-class society. A rare time when she's more function than ornament.

Hannibal was dangerous, yes, but his lethality stemmed from arrogance, assuredness of his abilities and place in the order of things. Celeste was dangerous the way only a mother could be. Hannibal had his talents, Celeste had hers. For now, they were using them separately but towards the same goal. She hoped that one day they would be in tandem together, flawlessly effective. If not...

Then he isn't welcome.

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